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SEEK LIFE ELSEWHERE

**A Poetry Collection Not A
Homecoming**

Derick Ebert

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Fine Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May
2019

“Some stayed, some jumped to their graves, those who wouldn’t become slaves...instead became
WAVES” — Lupe Fiasco

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Above The North Canadian River (After Terrance Hayes's A Postcard From Okemah)

Below their graying feet
the yawning river
a familiar spectator watches.
It's murky mouth like America's
history

mangling the neck
of a body fortified air.
Attached to the rope
a mother & son hang
their bodies cast to the water

bait to draw the racist. They appear
above the river wearing black hats
like dark halos a cold swarm
of grins. If there is a God

where is she hanging? Mother
creator of suns now but a name
the son's chest an empty space
with a message to witnesses:
seek life elsewhere.

Roy Bryant

“My town is Jim Crow. If we could stop night from coming, we would.
I live in peace with y’all, that’s by choice. Seeing colors an option, I prefer its absence.
Such a good place *we have* to raise *our boys*

I saw the boy’ and did not want him dead, then. He was muddy
in the face, no lighter than a brown bag. We ain’t exchange words
just nodded our heads in passing. I ain’t want to kill him.
But he blew hot air over his tongue. And my wife told me it was for her.

We waited until the day was at its ugliest black. The kind that makes a white man
hate his shadow for being a nigger. Once I caught my gal’ eyeing this sambo and smiling
and I knew then to never leave her alone with their boys. I don’t know if he spoke.
I believe what she says, that she was not tempted.

Water can’t be equal. Coloreds should know *our laws*. It can be a weapon
if we need it. I told my brother and he turned red as a wound. No good
muggy skin, who will love you after you are beaten cold? What will it take for you to learn?”
When you are given a face only your mother will recognize.

Moses

| I was born | | by the river |

| given' to its | | waters. I come | | from gold. Sweat |

| my people give | | the streams blues. | | I amongst alabaster | | stones am of |

| puddle mud and | | straw. My people's | | blood syrups from | | backs, to warm |

| sand. Does it | | make the lands | | honey bitter? I | | clay brown tall | | like this rod. |

| I came as a prophet. | | A burning bush | | granted me visions | | my people go | | over

Egypt's beach | | to paradise. God | | gave me hallucinations | | of grandeur. I |

| imagine you belong | | to another God | | or the prayers | | of your people |

| didn't make it | | out of bondage. |

Persephone & Demeter (As Black Son & Mother)

You wish you could follow me everywhere
don't you? I used to stand in your room, in your shoes
and prance. Some boys will be boys, differently.

Now I have earned the floorboards respect
they won't snitch but slumber when I glide
smoothly on their backs, like wax I race

from the top step, spilling to the door, then
outside. I carry night on my head like a black hat
mother says, *not too late please*

I'm her only boy to come home before the dark
buries another sun. If she calls and no response
across valleys and hills, through cities she will storm

to find me full of thunderous laughter.
What did you think? See the ground cackles as well
then you blink and it's winter.

T Walks Home From Royal Farms With The Ghost Of Emmett Behind Him

Before I leave

I smile. It's one way I've learned to pray.

When I walk home I never stop.

If I'm not seen — then there can be no assumption

to believe

I was even there breathing.

I tell my mom just breathe.

She doesn't want me to leave.

She knows crooked smiles believe

in bent words. I've tried prayer

but God is too busy I assume

so I stopped.

The man hailing above me sneers *stop*

fighting nigger, his breath

heavy with alcohol, mind full of assumptions

I try leaving

but my body breaks like a knee in prayer.

Believe?

I tried believing

but what if this never stops?

I'd pray

but I'm breathless.

You must leave

they have too many assumptions

about you. Do not assume

you are safe

here. Believe

me boy

leave

don't stop

to breathe

or pray.

Maybe God prays

and we're not listening

I assume

*he speaks between each breathe
but that's hard to believe.*

Please keep running don't stop

run leave

there must be somewhere else leave

*go find it don't stop
believing.*

Job (As Black Teacher)

The news came first then I froze
as any deer might — startled
by the rustling. For a moment
imagine me a family — students
instead. Is there a difference?

God watched the blood jelly sticky
the knife. I must be a parent. How I waited
like a mother possum — for death
to undo itself.

A Poem For The Reader

I would change the subject. But how?

We're always in the headlines.

Nightmare

For William McCabe

i don't know how these things happen
when i point my gun the boy at the end
lives even after reaching at his waistband
to draw a toy gun a tragedy averted
my almost worst day think about it
i get up in the morning like you
& expect to make it home in time for dinner
every month my uniform's on tv
for something different a teen no
a child i hug my own kids
their arms latch my hip
like a holster. Here i am not feared
i know a guy who killed a guy
who killed his grandmother
and all I'm saying is sometimes
aiming a gun is like looking through a kaleidoscope
& asking for a clearer picture.

America

I think all things rejected
find home eventually.
Out on the black top
chalk lines stretch, somewhere

someone is in pandemonium
tasting a dead name
soot in the mouth.
These streets have no memory

the earth can't save our voices
the way Pompeii can cradle a body
from extinction. If home is where death is least likely,
then I cannot live here.

Port Authority Bus Terminal, 2017

I heard another bomb tore its way through some sidewalk
they say it was some would be suicide attacker

I heard any action that expresses disapproval is a protest. Though I don't know
if I have the capacity to hold that much sadness
for the family of the man who did it. Still

I do feel something
a quiet understanding for space

Like two strangers squished together by
the piling of bodies on a packed train.

Somewhere on Google I read
a U.S. soldier burst into a house and slaughtered
16 Afghan civilians

& I can't help but think
was it because he too needed more room?
Friends say the darkness that had been

tugging at him finally swallowed him
& I think this a poor excuse for America

has always been trained to light up darker silhouettes
with gun fire. He saw a gun range & did

what he was taught.

I do not blame the villagers thirst
blood for blood how the body

can become a war when targeted.

I too want to fight each morning

I find what remains of the dead black boys
now living on my timeline tucked tightly into

a few words & I want to hunt
the cop that did it & they say it was like a

camouflaged grim reaper came into their home
& lately it's gotten harder for me to cry

so I stay silent when I hear a pipe bomb erupted
somewhere downtown & I think

his mother raised him to be a good son. I think
the terrorist is a martyr to somebody.

The Etymology Of Mulatto

is an interracial house. Where
mom and dad spent years rinsing away
talk of race. Careful to avoid
too much color bleeding into the fabric
of my tongue. Before

it was a pass. Meant I could
walk through any door with a smile
and no one would bat an eye. From
my pale brown face not even God would know
I sprouted from a dark woman. Before

it was called *mulato*. Spanish
for mulo or mule
he who is an anomaly. It's a word
that falls from the mouth like confetti
though shrapnel to the ear. Before

it was to be a disgrace. My grandfather
disappointed in my father for my mother
he a racist I a mistake. Biracial.
It means: to be questioned.
When all you want is to be home.

Lemon Cake for Tyndale Avenue

Vanilla for the paint,
 cascading from my father's brown T
to his khakis,
 cinnamon-sawdust seasoned our nights
then unfinished projects,
 became ghost that wouldn't evaporate
my father's pale hands,
 haunted rooms into storms
then his sweat
 made forgiveness bittersweet.

Ode To The Street Doctor

I need medicine when my mind wants to
mutilate this body, I need a straitjacket before I fight
myself, my loved ones aren't around when I need them
the most, will you hold me back keep me to a collar
put the leash in the hands of my mother

& not my own. There's vacancy in our dialogue
there's doctors in the hood without license to practice
whose house is a twenty-four-hour pharmacy for those in need
of urgent care; I swear these clinicians off-brand
but they put their patient first; ode to my weed man

ode to the way he be staple ready; when depression & anxiety
tries to tear my life apart, drug dealers be there to hold me
together; gorilla glue for broken black bodies because
stuck mouths don't know how to speak out
about mental illness; every loose leaf is a poem

every white paper burns with my scorched thoughts
every prescription bottle is not a bottle but a pot
to bury grass, there's a funeral in each joint passed
& my brain is a jail; with each cell lost I become closer
to freedom; today I watched my mans

roll a blunt in one hand while the other played father
his arms made a scale, balancing grams & graham crackers
his daughter unaware daddy peddles weight; I watch her go
outside to pedal her pink bike, her Daddy be like the weeds
sprouting between the pavement

doing what he can to survive; to see his seed grow
in a better environment, minimum wage need to come with a coffin
because you'll die trying to make a living; like life isn't hard enough
we need those who heal the hoods bodies & not take from it
I'm tired of hearing *pop pop* & not knowing if it's gunshots

or shout for missing fathers; we need a doc dealing dimes

who makes survival an art, healing humans hearts by way of hand
holding medicine to quiet the mind because my thoughts are self-genocide
& there's no health insurance that can prevent the body from
turning on itself; how long before I watch this dark space digest another light

before I find myself asking where the stars went; if they got tired of being high
up & went home; before I stop having my head in the clouds
& I will not take your pills I will not visit your doctor's
not after Tuskegee promised not after Planned Parenthood targeted
not after Henrietta died because we've put our bodies
in the wrong hands too many times

what if reparations looked like taking back the streets
looked like uprooting entire communities so our seeds
could live in a better environment; all the weeds outgrown
the hoods they started in; no more reason to fight
what a beautiful way to survive.

October Pantoum

Remember that time I kissed your cheek
rose petals bloomed under your maple skin &
I could've rested in you for hours &
I hope my casket is as comfortable as your left breast.

Rose petals unfold beneath maple trees
autumn is my favorite time of year
for comfort – I bury my face in your breast
like root to soil.

This is my favorite time of year to
pull you close until our arms braid
like roots I crawl into you
watch the sunrise beneath your skin & say, *hey*

I wrap around the trunk of your thighs like vines
I could lay under you for hours &
watch the sunrise illuminate your skin. Hey
remember that time I kissed your cheek?

Others will try to dress you

& whatever they tell you ignore because
being someone else is expensive.
carefully I have looked for myself in
department stores & in each rack found
emptiness clothed in a new gown. &
for what it's worth, all life may be is the
god inside us waiting to surface
harmlessly like a submarine after war &
I too wear my battle scars more than clothes
just to prove my skin is hugged by what's tried to
kill me but couldn't. & I've grown up to
love myself & my locs are an extension of
me like hangers holding up good clothes &
now I try on smiles & they fit me instead of falling
off. &, in the distance, where the eye can't see
past the blur of today shrouding the future
quietly, is a place for you too.
ready & bursting with joy like a
summer well spent searching
tirelessly for reasons to laugh
unbothered & free like a kite
veering across the sky
without worry. & isn't that all you want
xylophone colored teeth
yearning to play a beautiful song to un-
zip your fears & let them go?

What the Mirror Says

I am privately watching
What I am meant to see.

Like a casket I am:
a quiet column for the body

concerned with appearance. I am
you. The clumsy clothes and genes

temporary expressions of you but
not you. You will return and be eaten

by: the dandelion and the cat
and the cow, and human, and again

the world is in communion with itself.
You need not stare at me and question

That which is lost leave and love
like a sponge who knows not

the kind of water passing through it.
I am that which I do not understand.

To Be Sent to My Older Brother, With a Picture of Frida Kahlo's 'The Wounded Deer'

There is something about a VCR that brings nostalgia & in this one we are smaller & our spines have not yet stretched into bats & at some point you block my path to the kitchen as if you were a deer & the thing about obstacles are that their intentions & what they've stopped us from becoming go unnoticed & I imagine you knew this even then.

Frida Kahlo may have known this better than anyone after her going through thirty operations to treat the chronic pain in her back & I guess I'm saying her bones became tenants she could not evict or despite this I imagine she got up every morning to paint with arms outstretched like a shoreline as if to claim everything in reach & in this painting the distance between sea & land is divorced by a choir of trees & they are all singing from the dark gaps in their necks & Frida has become a buck.

& once I went to the woods with our father & a cross bow & left carrying our own weight & Frida's deer-body is wounded by arrows though her face remains stiff as oak & I think about what it means to protect what you love even if what you keep safe causes pain & we do not talk as much as we should & it's as if one-day God bore a hole in our face & called it a mouth & my mouth was once a gift shop of words but that feels empty too.

Now our lives are starting to settle & I wish to move but can't & this must be how volcanoes feel holding in what simmers for years, eventually smoking it away & no cancer can erode these giants to the ground & we came from a man more mountain than city, who has been trying to rid his habit of Marlboros since the creation of cell phones which is to say my own existence & his pain cannot be painted in oil, only through the fog-breath of a cigarette & I am older now & what's beyond this trail I faintly see, like the clearing in a forest.